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SUBJECT: THE NORWAY HAMSUN YEAR CONTROVERSY

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Cherrie Daniels for reasons 1.4(b)
) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: August 5 marked the official opening of the Hamsun Center in Hamaroy, Norway, and the continued celebration of the "Hamsun Year," a commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the birth of Nobel Prize winning author and Nazi sympathizer Knut Hamsun. The "Hamsun Year" has brought controversy unexpected by the Norwegians, with leading international Jewish organizations criticizing Norway's decision to honor Hamsun and his literary achievements. The Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research (ITF), which Norway currently chairs, the GON, and even the Foreign Minister himself have been forced to issue statements defending Norway's decision to honor Hamsun. While the Norwegian explanations that they are honoring only his literary achievements and directly confronting his Nazi past ring true, the episode does show how Norwegian attitudes regarding anti-Semitism issues sometimes lack sensitivity, as explained in this cable's long comment. End Summary.

NORWAY CRITICIZED BY PROMINENT JEWISH ORGANIZATIONS

¶2. (U) In mid-June, the Simon Wiesenthal Center sent out a press release calling on Norway to give up its role as chair of the ITF because "any official celebration of such a prominent Nazi collaborator is in total contradiction" to the principles on which the ITF was founded. Similarly, on July 9, Baruch Tenenbaum of the International Raoul Wallenberg Foundation sent an official letter of protest to the Norwegian government, in which he expressed his "astonishment and concern about a tribute to a person who actively supported one of the most sinister regimes in history."

MFA AND FOREIGN MINISTER STOERE RESPOND

¶3. (U) Foreign Minister Stoere sent a letter to Mr. Tenenbaum on July 30 emphasizing that Hamsun was being honored for his "literary" achievements--Stoere put the word "literary" in italics. Furthermore, "(t)he Hamsun anniversary in no way condones Hamsun's support for the Nazi regime ... and in fact the anniversary has intensified the public debate about all sides of his life. As a result, a nuanced and critical view of him, both as an acclaimed author and a person who sided with the Nazis who occupied Norway for five years, has developed," Stoere wrote. In addition to posting Stoere's letter online on the government's website, the MFA published a statement along the same lines, admitting that "Norway has been criticized internationally" for the Hamsun year, but "the Norwegian authorities believe that democracy and the education of coming generations will be served by being open, frank and transparent about these divergent aspects of Hamsun's life."

ITF AND OTHERS SUPPORT NORWAY

¶4. (SBU) The Norwegian Chair of the ITF, Ambassador Tom Vraalsen, also responded, supporting Norway's chairmanship, saying, "It is Hamsun's literary work that is to be honored. His pro-Nazi activities must continue to be condemned as they were when he was tried in Norway, convicted and punished after the war." Yehuda Bauer, an honorary chairman of the ITF and of the Simon Wiesenthal Scientific Institute of Holocaust Research pointed out in the Jerusalem Post on July 26 that "it was the Norwegian chairman that, before this controversy exploded, insisted on including the fight against anti-Semitism as a central component in the ITF's immediate future program." Bauer also characterized the attacks of "a number of important public and academic Jewish groups and personalities" on the Norwegians as nothing more than "an exercise in public relations." The Israeli Embassy in Oslo announced July 20 that they were "delighted" with the Norwegian ITF chairman's response to the controversy. Anne Sender, the leader of the Jewish community in Oslo, has repeatedly noted in the media here that the Hamsun year is an opportunity to educate people about Hamsun's Nazi sympathies.

NEW HAMSUM CENTER OPENS WITH A CELEBRATION

¶5. (SBU) The Hamsun Center was officially opened in Hamaroy, a small town north of the Arctic Circle, on August 5 by Norwegian Crown Princess Mette Marit. Three thousand people attended the event, including the American architect of the Center, Stephen Holl, and the Minister of Culture, Trond Giske. The first exhibitions at the Center will not be ready until 2010. Knut Olva Aamas, the culture editor for Aftenposten (a leading daily newspaper) remarked, "I think the Hamsun Year 2009 may, in retrospect, prove to be a milestone in the process of working through the Norwegian Hamsun-trauma. And maybe, just maybe, it may become possible, in time, to raise a statue of Hamsun and name a street or a square after him in the capital city. Not because that is a goal in and of itself, but because it may stand as a symbol of the fact that it is indeed possible to live with the fact that a great artist was also a traitor. Not to celebrate Hamsun's darker and more troublesome sides, but to fight our own."

COMMENT

¶6. (C) While Hamsun is celebrated as a great Norwegian author, his Nobel Prize was awarded in 1923, and he gave it as a gift to Goebbels, Hitler's propaganda minister, out of admiration for the Nazi cause. He expressed great sadness at the time of Hitler's death in 1945. It is therefore not surprising that the fact that Norway is now honoring him with a celebratory year distresses many around the world. The extent to which the Norwegians have been surprised that their decision was controversial, however, is revealing.

¶7. (C) Comment, continued: Stoere and the MFA's emphasis that Hamsun is being honored for his "literary" achievements miss the premise behind the criticism that has come down on the government of Norway in recent months--that enthusiastic Nazi sympathizers should not be expansively and officially honored at all, regardless of their other achievements. The emphasis by those Norwegians trying to calm the waters after the controversy erupted has primarily been upon how the celebration of Hamsun will start a "discussion" and a "deeper examination," in much the vein of Aamas's commentary above. Post finds this to be largely an after-the-fact rationalization; in fact, Hamsun is being celebrated because he is Norwegian, a Nobel Prize winner, and a famous author. In the first instance, Norwegians did not think that his support for the Nazis diminished or complicated any of these facts, and in discussions and editorials, many Norwegians express surprise and pronounced indignation that anyone should be offended. While post does not/not believe that the Hamsun year is in any way an expression of growing anti-Semitism, it is a revealing case of lack of sensitivity

to the standpoint of non-ethnic-Norwegians. This is a recurring theme in Norwegian society with regard to matters of race, integration, religious tolerance, and related issues. Post wishes to emphasize, however, that Norway remains a comparatively tolerant society, and that the Jewish community of Oslo has vehemently dissociated itself from any criticism of Norway and its decision to celebrate a "Hamsun Year." End Comment.

DANIELS